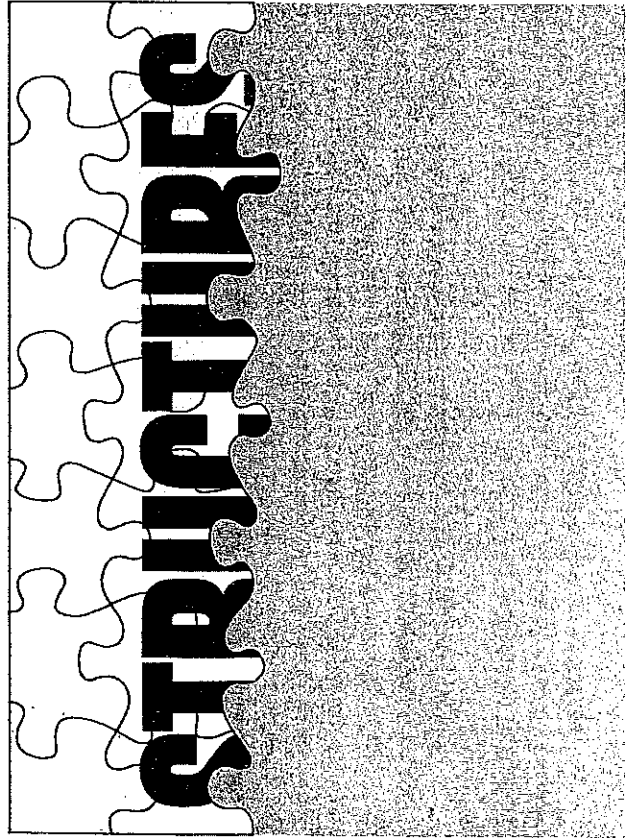


5. Absolutes



Suppose in a paper on the study habits of college students you are describing your roommate as she studies late one night. You begin by writing

Marie was sitting at her desk.

Her head was slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes.

You like your opening sentences, but you want the fact that Marie is sitting at her desk more closely connected to the detail of her lowered head. At first, you try to make this connection by simply joining the two sentences:

Marie was sitting at her desk, and her head was slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes.

You're not altogether happy with this version either, so you try again. Eventually you write something like this:

Marie was sitting at her desk, **her head slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes.**

You may like this version best, both because it is concise and because it clearly connects Marie's sitting at her desk to her lowered head. The phrase **her head slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes** is called an ABSOLUTE, a group of words that is almost but not quite a complete sentence. An absolute has a full subject but only part of a predicate, often only a participle. Absolutes are useful for adding narrative and descriptive detail to your sentences. They are especially appropriate for focusing on parts of a whole, in this case for shifting from a general description of Marie to specific details about her—her head, her feet, her hands:

Marie was sitting at her desk, **her head slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes, her hands clasped, her feet tapping the floor gently.**

Although the name may not be familiar, you've probably used absolutes without knowing what they were.

Everything considered, New York is the world's most exciting city.

All months have either 30 or 31 days, **February excepted.**

There are, **all told**, 144 countries in the United Nations.

This unit encourages you to practice constructing absolutes so that you will have the option of using them knowingly and purposely in your writing.

Let's say you are trying to communicate the sense of fear you once felt when a storm arose. At one point in your paper you write

The evening grew more menacing.

The breeze became gustier.

Whitecaps gave the lake a frothy, sinister appearance.

Perhaps these three blunt sentences are exactly what you want to convey your fear. But if not, you will want to experiment with various ways of combining them. Remembering that absolutes are particularly appropriate for adding details, for making a general statement like "the evening grew more menacing" more specific

and concrete, you may decide to transform your second and third sentences into absolutes. There are two ways of making a full sentence into an absolute. One is by omitting a form of the verb **to be**—such as **is, are, was, or were**. In this way, the full sentence “Her head **was** slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes” was made into the absolute “her head slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes.” The second way of turning a full sentence into an absolute involves changing the main verb into its **-ing** form. In the sentences about the menacing evening, this means changing **became** into **becoming** and **gave** into **giving**:

The evening grew more menacing, **the breeze becoming gustier, whitecaps giving the lake a frothy, sinister appearance.**

Absolutes often work most effectively at the middle or end of sentences, where they provide supporting detail for a more general previous statement.

Now see if you can make the next two sentences into a single sentence with an absolute:

The accountant sat quietly in the office.
His eyes were closed.

You can create a sentence with an absolute by dropping the word **were** from the second full sentence and attaching **his eyes closed** to the first:

The accountant sat quietly in the office, **his eyes closed.**

If you choose, you may also eliminate “his”:

The accountant sat quietly in the office, **eyes closed.**

The absolute is especially useful because of its flexibility. To the sentence about the accountant, for example, you have the option of adding still further detail following the absolute. You might add such detail in the form of a participial phrase, an appositive, or even another absolute:

The accountant sat quietly in the office, **eyes closed**, waiting for the telephone to ring.

The accountant sat quietly in the office, **eyes closed**, a defeated man.

The accountant sat quietly in the office, **eyes closed, four tickets to the Cheyenne rodeo in his hands.**

Aside from carrying details, absolutes can be used to suggest a relationship of cause and effect, especially at the beginning of a sentence. Suppose, for example, you wanted to combine the following two sentences in order to imply that one action was the cause of another:

The stern of the battleship was torn apart by torpedoes.
The battleship slowly sank into the Pacific.

Your first impulse might be to write,

Because its stern was torn apart by torpedoes, the battleship slowly sank into the Pacific.

This sentence is perfectly acceptable, but the same cause-effect relationship can be suggested, more concisely, with an absolute:

Its stern torn apart by torpedoes, the battleship slowly sank into the Pacific.

If there had been a second cause of the ship’s sinking—let’s say that its interior had been gutted by fire—that fact could also be added in the form of an absolute:

Its stern torn apart by torpedoes, its interior gutted by fire, the battleship slowly sank into the Pacific.

You also have the option of omitting **its** from each of the absolutes:

Stern torn apart by torpedoes, interior gutted by fire, the battleship slowly sank into the Pacific.

What cannot be omitted is the comma, or sometimes the dash, which always accompanies an absolute. When absolutes occur in

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the middle of a sentence, they are punctuated by two commas or, less frequently, two dashes.

How would you combine the following sentences?

His homework was done.

His English composition was written.

Larry decided to go see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

You have, as always, a number of options:

His homework was done and his English composition was written, so Larry decided to go see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

OR

Since his homework was done and his English composition was written, Larry decided to go see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

OR

After his homework was done and his English composition was written, Larry decided to go see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Another workable option is the absolute, here constructed by omitting the verb **was** from each of the first two sentences:

His homework done, his English composition written, Larry decided to go see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

But notice that moving the absolutes to the end of the sentence produces some confusion:

Larry decided to go see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, his homework done, his English composition written.

Confusion is created because the time relationships expressed in the sentence are unclear. Since Larry completed his homework and wrote his composition before deciding to take in a movie, those facts should logically be expressed first, not last, in the sentence. In general, absolutes work best at the middle or end of a

sentence, but absolutes that either suggest a cause-effect relationship or refer to an earlier event work best at its beginning.

Like participles and appositives, absolutes may be used in a series, which can be particularly forceful when building toward a climax:

The arrested woman was slammed against a wall, **her body frisked, her wrists handcuffed, her dignity lost**.

In this example the final absolute **her dignity lost** both generalizes from the two earlier absolutes and broadens their meaning. The sentence would lose impact if **her dignity lost** did not occur as the final series item. To hear the difference, try reading the sentence out loud with **her dignity lost** as the first or second item.

Knowing that an absolute series gains power when its items are placed in order of increasing importance, how would you combine these sentences?

The room was in chaos.

Empty soda bottles and beer cans were everywhere.

Soiled clothes were strewn on the floor.

Cosmetics were scattered over the dresser.

Since the sentence with the bottles and cans "everywhere" comes closest to describing the room's complete disorder, it should probably be positioned at the end of the series:

The room was in chaos—**soiled clothes strewn on the floor, cosmetics scattered over the dresser, empty soda bottles and beer cans everywhere**.

- I. 1. A few minutes later I made my way to the Chevy pickup.
2. Packages were under my arm.
3. Crudely drawn maps were in my hand.
4. The pickup was parked in front of the store.

- J. 1. The professor rested against the blackboard.
2. Chalk was in one hand.
3. A look of profound discouragement was in her eyes.
4. A textbook was in the other hand.

Sentence Combining Exercise

Combine the following sentences into an effective whole that includes several absolutes. Add a detail or two of your own to the story.

FISHING

1. The boys leaned against the willow tree.
2. The tree grew next to the stream.
3. Their fishing poles rested on sticks.
4. Their eyes gazed at the bobbers.
5. The bobbers floated on the ripples.
6. The morning had been cool.
7. It had been comfortable.
8. The afternoon was growing sultry.
9. Both boys had taken great pleasure.
10. The pleasure was in planning the trip.
11. Both had looked forward to Friday.
12. Friday was their only day off from school all spring.
13. The bass hadn't been biting.
14. The boys spent most of the morning.
15. They spent it talking.
16. They spent it occasionally dozing off.
17. They dozed off to dream.
18. They dreamed of catching fish.
19. The fish didn't take the lines.
20. They periodically teased the boys.

Basic Pattern Exercise

Combine each of the groups of sentences below into a single sentence containing at least one absolute.

Example

1. When I walked in, Grandpa was sitting at the kitchen table.
2. The newspaper was spread before him.



When I walked in, Grandpa was sitting at the kitchen table, **the newspaper spread before him.**

- A. 1. Jimmy walked slowly to the corner of the playground.
2. His face was streaked with tears.
- B. 1. The station wagon sped away.
2. The taillights disappeared into the distance.
- C. 1. Rocky is a slum fairy tale.
2. Its plot is simple even by Hollywood standards.
- D. 1. Imagine yourself on top of a long, steep, snowy-white hill.
2. The sky is burning blue around you.
- E. 1. His opponent had gained a lead of almost 100,000 votes.
2. The senator publicly conceded that he had lost his reelection bid.
- F. 1. Waiting for Matt Dillon in the center of Dodge City is the bad guy.
2. His black hat casts a dark shadow upon the town.
- G. 1. The women up and down the alley swatted flies.
2. They fussed with their unruly hair.
3. Their mouths were full of clothespins.
- H. 1. The photographer sits, compact, on the 30-yard line.
2. One knee is folded under his body.
3. The other knee is upright to support his elbow.